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# **The Conversion to Protestantism: A Challenge in Ethnic and Religious Life of Brahmanism Cham People in Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

The Cham Balamon people in Vietnam are an ethnic group with long religious and cultural traditions, who give a great importance to preserving their own cultural identity through generations. However, in recent years there are many economic, cultural and social changes in the life of the Cham Balamon community. One of the significant changes in the spiritual life of this community is the conversion of belief from Hinduism to Christianity. We think that this is an outstanding problem that needs to be addressed by formal and comprehensive scientific research projects. We have dispatched several research groups to conduct field trips, deep interviews and sociological surveys on the spiritual life of the Cham Balamon community. This paper is the first step of those researches pointing out the problems and challenges to the Cham Balamon community in Ninh Thuan Province, Vietnam. These are cultural and belief conflicts among people in the community or even among family members. However, we would predict that the biggest challenge is the risk of losing cultural identities that the Cham Balamon community is facing today due to religious conversion.

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The Centre of Vietnam is home to 26 ethnic minorities, each of which has its own unique and distinctive culture. The splendid Cham culture belongs to the Cham ethnic minority people. This community inhabit mainly in Ninh Thuan province (57137 people) and Binh Thuan province (29356 people)<sup>1</sup>. The Cham community has had a harmony co-inhabitation with other ethnic groups in history. After 1985, when the Centre of Vietnam was under reformation and international economic integration, the ethnic minorities here have had remarkable achievements and contributed to the gradual change in infrastructure, reduced poverty and improved education and health care. However, the ethnic minorities in general and the Brahmanism Cham people in particular have to face challenges that need to be addressed in an urgent manner. The changes in religious life of the Brahmanism Cham need to be researched and clarified. In this article, we will focus on the biggest challenge in the spiritual life of the Brahmanism Cham, which is the conversion to Protestantism of part of the Brahmanism Cham community in Ninh Thuan province, in the Centre of Vietnam.

There are 30 Brahmanism Cham villages in Ninh Thuan province and Binh Thuan province in the Centre of Vietnam, of which 15 villages in Ninh Thuan and 15 villages in Binh Thuan. This article uses statistical data and field trip reports collected by our research group since 1985 from the two villages:

- [1] Vu Bon Village in Phuoc Nam Commune, Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan province, a Cham Balamon village, which is home to 97 households of 425 people and which is called Palei Ca-Bhar.
- [2] Hieu Thien Village in Phuoc Nam commune, Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan province, a Cham Balamon village, which is home to 120 households of 731 people and which is called Palei Palao.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnology Institute, *Ethnic Minorities in the Southern Provinces of Vietnam*, Hanoi, Social Sciences Publishing House, 1984, 135.

Ninh Phuoc District of Ninh Thuan Province is on a delta, which is 12km to the South West of Ninh Phuoc town and 32 km to the South of Phan Rang – Thap Cham City. The community grows rice for a living. According to government's ranking, these two villages are ranked to belong to area II, which starts to develop.<sup>2</sup> These are two typical Cham Balamon villages in Vietnam.

The Cham community started to follow Brahmanism early in the first half of the first Millenium. Brahmanism was the official religion of the Cham community during this period. The Brahmanism Cham people call themselves as Ahier Cham or Jat Cham (Jat Cham: original Cham)<sup>3</sup>. Other religions of the Cham community such as Bani Cham (Awal Cham) or Islam Cham came much later. All tangible cultural heritages such as towers, sculptures, Kut statues, festivals and other oldest intangible culture heritage were created by the Ahier Cham. After thousands years of existence, Brahmanism followed by the Cham people has changed and incorporated in the local beliefs and culture. This change is demonstrated clearly in the perception of the Brahmanism Cham people. According to a survey, except the intellectuals and priests, most Brahmanism Cham does not know the concepts of Brahma and Shiva. They only know Porome, Po Nagar and Poklong Garai, who are worshipped in the three old Cham towers. Besides Vishnu, the main God worshipped in every Cham tower, the rest are Nature Gods and local deities. The most fundamental difference is the Creator is known as Country Mother Pô Inu Nur gar instead of Brahma, the Supreme Creator in Hinduism. According to the statistics of Cham Culture Research Centre of Ninh Thuan province, there are up to 116 gods prayed in Cham festivals and rituals. Hindu Gods and Goddess were replaced by local Gods and Goddess, which was an influence of matriarchy. For instance, the God of Fire of Agni replaced by the God of Fire of Yang Apui, the God of Sun of Surya replaced by the God of Pô Atlitiak, the God of Wind Vâyü replaced by the God of Wind Pô Yan An Angin.

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<sup>2</sup> Vietnam Statistic Bureau, *Research on Household Living Standard 2006*, Hanoi: Statistic Publishing House, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Bui Khan The, ed., *Viet-Cham Dictionary*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1995, 219.

Another fundamental difference is that there are many local Gods worshipped in the community such as the God of Mountain, the God of Sea, The God of Career, the God of Soil, Mother Goddess, deities etc. The rituals practiced by the Brahmanism Cham has been changed a lot, especiall life-cycle rituals which are important to Brahmanism such as the grown-up ceremony, wedding, funerals etc. In general, the Brahmanism Cham people do not follow strictly the Brahmanism rites and rituals. There are some rituals originated from Cham local culture such as Mother Goddess worship ceremony, ancestor worship ceremony, the custom of lying on fire in grown-up ceremony or not following karma and the influence of karma in funeral rituals, and Kut worshipping etc. Therefore, it is not original Brahmanism in the Brahmanism Cham community but it is localized to become an ethnic religion or local religion. Although the religious texts and laws are not clear, the community has very strict rules of matriarchy and Kut custom such as Kut Entering ritual following mother's side, marriage of same religion and ethnic etc. All above rules are voluntarily abided by Cham people and considered as their own religion. This consolidates Cham society and Brahmanism was localized within Cham community, creating Cham unique and rich values. Brahmanism left an invaluable heritage to Cham community. There are three famous towers in Ninh Thuan Province, which are Hoa Lai Tower, PôKlong Garai tower and Pô Rômê tower.

In addition to these towers, there are many temples (danok) such as Po Nuga temple, Pô Rômê temple, Pô Klong Garai temple, and Pô Klong Chan temple. Along with towers and temples, rites and festivals have been also preserved well by the Cham people in Ninh Thuan province such as Poh bang yang festival (tower door opening ceremony), Yuôr yang festival (Rain Prayer ceremony), Bun chate festival (Goddess worshipping in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of Cham calendar), Katê festival, Ramurwan festival. In addition, there is a system of rites and rituals for community and family such as Rì a prong ceremony (Great Dance Ceremony), Rija nugar ceremony, Rija harey ceremony (Day Time Dance) and other rice farming festivals such as Pachah hamu (Soil Gratitude Ceremony), Palek padai (Seed Sowing ceremony), Padang paday tuan (Hut Constructing ceremony); iew po bhum (Rice ceremony when the rice starts growing); Padai đok tian (Rice ceremony when the rice

starts ripening); da apatai tagok lau (Rice ceremony when the rice is cultivated). The Pachah hamu Ceremony (Soil Gratitude ceremony) is the ceremony to start the farming in a year. The Gods and Saints prayed in this ceremony are the God of Soil, the God of Sun (yang dit), the God of Moon (chăn), the God of Fire (adi tiak), Saint Po Lihik, Saint Po Abu, Saint Tali, and Saint Howa etc. The rituals are started with announcing farming and praying for protection of buffalos, working tools and the family. People draw a magic image of a young woman on the land, using a sandalwood stick to touch the drawing and chant, "please give birth on all over the land". In addition, there are many rites and rituals for houses and family such as Yang Padang Sang (house construction ceremony), Padang Pâtu Ghin (God of Kitchen Set up ceremony), yang bilih tanuh/ yang mutanu (land purifying ceremony), yang takai tayah (God of Veranda ceremony) etc.

In general, the Cham religion not only preserves the towers and temples but also unique rituals, festivals, songs, worshipping practices and dancing which are considered as Brahmanism Cham cultural heritage. As a result, Brahmanism was not able to become a popular religion in Cham society due to the fact that it is distanced from the world Brahmanism. The predominance of traditional local beliefs created a mixture of outer and inner factors, which led to the formation of an ethnic religion.

Nowadays, the Cham culture is not the same as the original culture but get the influences by other cultures such as India, Arab, and Persian. The religious life of Cham people in Ninh Thuan province before 1980 of 20<sup>th</sup> century can be summarized as below:

1. The religion of Cham people in Ninh Thuan province was complex, complicated and full of disputes. There were three Cham communities following three different religions and beliefs and living in five different areas. The Brahmanism Cham people resided in three areas and were divided into three groups of followers under three -pô dhia. The Brahmanism Cham community often witnessed the disputes for pô dhia position. For instance, the dispute of pô dhia of Pô Rôme Tower in Hau Sanh in 1972, the dispute of pô dhia of Pô Nugar Tower in Huu Duc in 1993. These disputes affected the daily life and social order of Cham

people in Ninh Thuan province. The Bani Cham (traditional Islam) and Islam Cham (New Islam) communities lived in the other two areas and also had many conflicts due to fight for influence between traditional Islam and new Islam. For instance, the conflict at Van Lam, Ninh Phuoc District in 1978 or the fight in Phuoc Nhon, Ninh Hai district lasted from 1978 to 1985, which led to splits and disunification.

2. The Cham religion and beliefs did not have a stable and consistent text, laws and calendar. There was inconsistency in Cham calendar. In general, the religious texts and laws of Brahmanism Cham were not strictly preserved and mostly based on hand written religious texts. Therefore, they were inconsistent, changed and distorted through times. In other hand, Brahmanism when migrated to the Cham community had combined with local culture and fork beliefs so the religious text and laws and god system were not the same as pure Brahmanism but different depending on the history and social circumstances of each locality. For instance, Mother of Land Pô nuga had different names at different localities such as Pô Nuga Taha, Pô Nuga Hamakut, or Pô Nuga Murâu etc. The Rija Nuga festival was started at different time by two Brahmanism Cham communities in Phan Rang District and Phan Ri District, which were close to each other. There were also two kinds of religious calendars, one of Brahmanism Cham and one of Islam Cham which were used for two different religions and based on different calculation. Brahmanism Cham calendar was calculated based on solar cycle and used for festivals, ceremonies, weddings, and funerals in Cham society. Meanwhile, the calendar used by Bani Cham was calculated based on lunar cycle and used for Islam festivals such as Ramuwan festival and Waha festival etc. However, Bani Cham people still used the calendar of Brahmanism Cham for weddings, funerals and worshipping. The calendar used by Brahmanism Cham was different from area to area. For instance, the calendars used by Brahmanism Cham in Phan Rang District and Phan Ri District are inconsistent. This was a serious issue in religious life of Cham people, as they believed that if the time calculation was incorrect or

changed, there would be disasters, crop failure, and hunger. The fact that inconsistent calendars were used for weddings and festivals in different localities led to internal conflicts and splits.

3. There was a lack of successors to the leaders in Cham religion and belief. The priests and leaders in Cham community played a very important role and we could only recognize the Cham religion and belief through this class. However, there was a lack of successors. According to the latest survey result, there are 38 Brahmanism Cham priests, 128 Bani Cham priests and 10 Islam Cham priests who have quite high life expectancy. Currently, the Brahmanism Cham priests, even the three Po dhia, who are leaders of the Cham religion, still do not have a successor. Due to many reasons, the Cham priests have gradually lost the respect from the community and they are not models for the community anymore. It is a prediction that in 10 to 20 years, the Brahmanism Cham priests will come to a crisis period which leads to a degradation or change in religious life.
4. There are many complex, costly and time-consuming rites and rituals in Cham religion and belief, creating a burden in social life. For instance, the Kate festival is celebrated on the first day of the seventh Lunar month in Ninh Thuan province. The festivals are held at the same time at three towers, which are PôKlong Garai tower, Pô Rômê tower and Pô Nuga tower. The whole village wears new clothes, sing, dance and go to the towers with colourful flags to start the festival rituals, which are door-opening ritual, statue washing ritual, and chaiting. Songs are sung for every God. There are other important festivals to be celebrated in a year such as Ca-mbun festival, Rain Praying festival, Purifying festival, and night praying sessions etc.

The Cham religion and beliefs have too many rituals, festivals and ceremonies (100 festivals, 116 Gods), and colourful festival costumes, offerings, which are time consuming, costly and takes a lot of effort of the community. This is an issue, which the Cham people want to improve. The above reality is also the reason, which

makes part of the Cham people worried, anxious and lost their belief in the traditional religion and which leads them to look for another belief. Among changes in the religious life of the Brahmanism Cham people, the conversion from the traditional religion (Brahmanism) to Protestantism is the most significant one.

Protestantism, as a world religion, has been migrated to Vietnam over 100 years. In the process of development, Protestantism chose a soft approach with simple and rituals, which are easy to follow. In many places, Protestantism adjusts to the local customs and has an increasing number of followers. Looking back at 100 years of Protestantism in Vietnam, we can see that this process was significantly influenced by social and political upheavals, especially when the country was divided. The Vietnam Protestantism Church was a sole organization in the beginning, but latter was splited into two organizations with different political nature and size. However, Protestantism has reached many areas in Vietnam. There are 2.2 million of followers at the moment. In the last 30 years, Protestantism has developed rapidly in Tay Nguyen, Tay Bac and other areas of ethnic minority raising some social and cultural issues. First of all, it is the conflict with family and social pratices, traditional beliefs and other religions in Viet Nam. Worshipping ancestors, tutelary Gods and those who contributed to the village and the country are sacred tasks and even the first moral requirement to each Vietnamese in a family and a village. The customs and rituals are influenced by Confucianism, showing the gratitude of children to their parents and grandparents through occasions such as death anniversary, funeral, and wedding. These are the beauty and humanity of Vietnam culture. Meanwhile, Protestantism is a monotheistic religion, worshipping a single God. Protestantism opposes picture and statue worshipping and is especially against idolatry. Conditions to become an official Protestant are those of not worshipping ancestors, not being superstitious, not using or trading items that go against the principles of Protestantism such as drug, alcohol, and idolatry. The argument for this opposition is that, "How many generations of ancestors that you can worship? Two, three or four if they are worshipped in your family and ten or twenty if they are worshipped in the family line? How about the generations before those? Are they all ancestors? Therefore, we only worship God.



God is our ancestor.” When Protestantism first migrated to Viet Nam, missionaries tried their best to criticize and fight against customs and belief system of Vietnamese such as fengshui, date selection for important events, worship of the God of Soil and worship of Mother Goddess etc.

Along with the development of Protestantism are changes in lifestyle, psychology, emotion, social stratification, culture clashes, ethnic religious disputes, which lead to significant impacts on social and political life, psychology and lifestyle, customs, family structure and complex and sensitive issues. Protestantism has developed rapidly in Vietnam, especially in the ethnic minorities in the Northern area, the Centre and the South of Vietnam since 1980s. The Brahmanism Cham people started to follow Protestantism. According to Protestantism Cham followers, in 1994, Pastor Truong Van Hoang of the Vietnamese Baptist Church came to this area and established Protestantism organizations in the Brahmanism Cham Community. Nowadays, there are two Protestantism organizations in Binh Thuan province and Ninh Thuan province with many Cham followers, which are Dong Giang Baptist Church and Phan Rang Baptist Church. According to the statistic of the Vietnamese Baptist Church, the followers of these two organizations are Brahmanism Cham people (75%), K’Ho people (15%) and Kinh people (10%). Under the churches are associations such as Ca Na, Chat Thuong, Truong Tho, Gon, Tam Ngan etc. Under association level are sub-associations such as Phuoc Dong, Lap La etc...and groups such as Lkuong Giang, Loi Hai, Bau Ngu etc.

The missionary methods used by pastors are to worship the supernatural power of Jesus, to help poor families or sick people with money, food, medicine etc. Moreover, missionaries always choose people who have credibility or women who have voice in the community to be their assistants. This is due to the Brahmanism Cham society is still matriarchal. Dong Thi Kim Nguyen is a typical case. When she was 13 years old in 1993, she was chosen to be “a medium” in religious festivals or rituals and the villager’s believed that she had an ability to receive messages from God. Because of that, she was highly respected and had a good reputation. In 1998, Pastor Truong Van Hoang witnessed her conversion to a follower of Vietnamese Baptist Church. With her credibility and influence,

Kim Nguyen became an effective assistant of the Protestantism mission. At the moment, she is one of the most passionate missionaries of United Baptist Church. Her family including her husband, children and relatives follow Protestantism too. Protestantism mission is well organized and have clear subjects. It is carried out in simple and flexible form, which arm to groups of different education levels, age and needs.

In the research on religious life of Protestantism Cham people in Canh Thanh village and Lieu Thien village, there is only 20 percent of villagers when being asked, "Why do you follow Christianity?" answered that they "believe in the power of God" and "in order to be blessed by God". Meanwhile, 70 percent of followers replied that because they were helped with money, medicine and food by the church. Or, when being asked "Who is the most trusted people in the village? and "Why?", 80 percent of the followers answered that it was "It's the church because they help us and make our life less miserable". These instances demonstrate that most of the Protestantism Cham people do not know much about bible and do not have a strong belief. In the aspect of belief, most of the followers converse to Protestantism for material interests in a temporary manner due to hardship and poverty. A number of Cham people go back to their traditional religion when they gain no more material interest or when the material problems are solved.

Protestantism started in Ninh Thuan in 1980s but it has developed slowly with many difficulties. The Protestantism Cham community has formed since 1995 and after 15 years, it has 1000 followers. They are mostly poor families. They has converted to Protestantism not because of a need of belief or because they understand its doctrine but because of economical interests such as free rice, medicine, books and notebooks, and clothes, etc. On the other hand, they do not have to spend a lot of money on Cham traditional marriage customs and funeral rituals.

In our opinions, the causes for which Brahmanism Cham converse to Protestantism are as below:

- Firstly, it is due to poverty. Most of the converts are poor families, of which 90 percent are of the poorest families in

the village. Only few rich or intellectual families conversed to Protestantism.

- It is due to the fact the Cham people has not been able to catch up with rapid economical, cultural and social transition. In addition, the traditional religious life of Brahmanism Cham people has adapted slowly to the demands of contemporary society.
- It is due to the fact the Brahmanism Cham still carry out complex rituals that take time and money. In addition, there are splits, prejudice and disunity in the community such as fighting for the rank of Po Adhia or Po Sá (the highest level of Cham priest), not agreeing in the time to perform rituals, and different interpretation of their doctrine and canon.
- Today, young Cham people are not keen on traditional religion due to lack of understanding about the cultural values and religious traditions. Many people think that there are so many daily religious restrictions and avoidance, which bring no economical interest or benefit at all for contemporary life and business.
- Protestantism has a practical way of missionary work, simple rituals, strict organization and timely help to poor families, which attract Cham people to follow.

Researching the reality and causes of why Brahmanism Cham converse to Protestantism, we believe that in the near future, there will be an increase of conversion. Now, there are more than 1000 followers residing in some villlages in Ninh Phuoc district (especially in Phuoc Nam commune), Ninh Thuan province. The development of Protestantism makes the interaction between people and religion becomes more complicated leading to potential religious and ethnic problems in the area.

We also think that there will be problems in the Brahmanism Cham and Protestantism Cham community.

- There will be conflicts in the families and relatives due to differences of culture, belief and religious rituals between Brahmanism and Protestantism, which leads to constant

and unavoidable arguments and conflicts in life style, behavioral culture, and ritual practicing.

- There will be splits and disunity in Cham community due to arguments and fights among households or competition for influence, causing problems in the social order, stability and sustainable growth of four Cham communities including Brahmanism, Bani, Islam and Protestantism.

These above social realities will cause more serious problems such as instability, changing or even broken traditional family structure and community organization. For example, in the Brahmanism Cham community, people believe in Po Dhia (the highest rank of Cham priest) but the rituals are performed based on social ranks and age. The Protestantism Cham people believe in pastors, missionaries and church ceremonies and they neither participate in traditional festivals nor comply with the hierarchy and age order.

Another risk is that the cultural identity are eroded or changed. For example, some of the unique agricultural festivals or rituals, such as Kut Ritual, Irrigation Clearing Festival, Planting Festival, and New Rice Festival, are discontinued and disappeared, especially the disappearance of Good Harvest Season Festival and The Opening Ceremony of Communal House. These are challenges to the Brahmanism Cham community.

From these studies, we believe that the conversion of Brahmanism Cham to Protestantism is a major challenge not only to the traditional religion, cultural identity but also to the social order and stability of the Cham people. There should be specific solutions in order to adjust and direct it for a sustainable community development. We propose some solutions as below:

1. The State should have an appropriate policy of religion and ethnicity. This is a step of legal realization in order to create favor economical, cultural and social conditions for the Brahmanism Cham community and to satisfy the mental and belief need of the Brahmanism Cham community. Religion plays a very important role and influences deeply the social life of Cham people. Religion has a strong link with the historical development process of Cham community. Therefore, religion issues of Cham people go

hand in hand with ethnic issues and link with the development of religions in the world, especially in South Asian countries, West Asian countries and South East Asia countries.

2. Local authorities should have specific plans to improve the economic situation of the Cham community in general and the Brahmanism Cham in particular. The first thing to do is to reduce poverty. Local authorities also should help to unify Cham community by organizing committees and associations.
3. To adjust some rituals, customs and restriction to make them simpler and take less time and money in the context of modern life but at the same time still preserve and develop traditional, cultural values and traditional values; To have a unified religious calendar.
4. To keep a close and friendly relationship with Po Dhia and to enhance the understanding of religion and traditional values of Brahmanism through them.

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